

"The Five Tragedies in *Macbeth*"

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Criticism about: *Macbeth*

[(essay date winter 1962) *In the following essay, Bernad offers a thematic survey of Macbeth, emphasizing five distinct aspects of tragedy--physical, psychological, moral, social, and theological--within the play.*]

One of the most remarkable things about Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the artistry with which the playwright has woven five distinct tragedies into one. *Hamlet* is intriguing, *King Lear* is profound, but *Macbeth* is complex, and it is this complexity which gives the play its richness, making a study of it so rewarding and every stage performance a new discovery. Paradoxically, the play is complex despite an extremely simple plot. There are no sub-plots. But the action is made to advance at five different levels, each of which may be called a distinct tragedy because each involves a reversal of fortune in a particular order.

I

At the most obvious level is the physical tragedy--physical, for want of a better term--in which a person of high estate (to adopt Bradley's paraphrase of the well-known Aristotelian definition) falls into an exceptional calamity involving complete ruin or death. A matchless soldier, kinsman to the king, wins the king's battles and the king's praise; but prompted by inner ambitions and external urgings he murders the king and assumes the crown, which he soon finds to be a "sterile" crown. Since "to be thus is nothing but to be safely thus", he plunges into an orgy of crime which eventually loses him his queen, his crown and his life.

This straightforward action makes for dramatic neatness. Everything is tucked in. There are no loose ends, as there are in *Hamlet* or in *Lear*. Its neatness of construction, unity of action, swiftness of movement, and great compression and brevity (at least in the state in which the text has come down to us) have prompted the critics to liken *Macbeth* to a Greek tragedy--in so far as the baroque could be likened to the classic.

But this simplicity is merely apparent, for a Shakespearian play is never thin. The simplicity of *Macbeth* is coupled with an intensity which made Bradley call it "the most vehement, the most concentrated, perhaps we may say the most tremendous, of the tragedies".¹ Macbeth's downfall involves more than the mere loss of life or crown. It involves another downfall equally real: the rapid and radical disintegration of two splendid personalities.

II

There can be no doubt that Macbeth is initially a splendid personality. His conduct in war is spectacular. He is "brave Macbeth", "Bellona's bridegroom". He is impervious to fear when merely natural foes confront him. For him there is no terror in the "rugged Russian bear, the arm'd rhinoceros or the Hyrcan tiger". Even at the end, with defeat inevitable, he is still the soldier who will fight "till from my bones my flesh be hacked". Only for one moment does he falter, as indeed any human being might.

Such a soldier commands respect. There is nothing puny about him. If his crimes are enormous, they are committed by a man who has the makings of greatness.²

Lady Macbeth, likewise, has the makings of greatness. Even if one were not prepared to accept Bradley's assessment of her as "the most commanding and perhaps the most awe-inspiring figure that Shakespeare drew",³ one must acknowledge a greatness visible in the very distortion of feminine nature which in others is tender, yielding, dependent, but which in her is iron-willed, masterful, dominant. No ordinary woman could call upon the spirits of darkness as she does:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts; unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top full

Of direst cruelty.

(I.v.41-44)

If this wickedness is horrible, it is the wickedness of the horribly strong.

Neither Macbeth nor his wife is "normal", if by normal is meant the ordinary, the mediocre, the run-of-the-mill. No tragic hero or heroine is normal in that sense. Tragedy is the downfall of a person in high estate, but this "high estate" is not merely a political or social concept; it includes a personal dimension which has nothing to do with the physical. The hero must be a moral colossus, gigantic in moral stature, drawn on a "heroic"--therefore an abnormal--scale. Though other mortals be made of spirit and clay, in him there must be less of the clay and more of the spirit, even if it be the proud spirit of Lucifer. But Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are "normal" in another sense of the term, for they are not insane. Initially, they are not maniacs. They *become* progressively less sane as the story unfolds. Their personalities, initially splendid, disintegrate. Having tried to control others, they end by losing control of themselves. Magnificent at first, they become, in the one case, a monster of iniquity, in the other, a pathetic victim of hallucinations who ends by killing herself.

III

This gradual disintegration of character is fascinating to watch. It begins harmlessly and imperceptibly enough in a certain abstractedness: "Look how our partner's rapt." It betrays itself further in a certain jumpiness, and even in hallucinations "proceeding from the heat oppressed brain": Macbeth sees a bleeding dagger in the air; Lady Macbeth sees a resemblance of her father in Duncan; both start at the hoot of the owl, the cry of the wolf, the shout of a man--though apparently no one has shouted. Keyed up as they are, they lose nerve at the crucial moments: she at the point of delivering the fatal blow, he after it.

Lady Macbeth, who at the beginning is unaffected by imaginary fears and could laugh at apparitions, is later tormented by an imaginary spot. Macbeth, before his crime, is fearless of blood and could "doubly redouble" strokes upon the foe "as if to memorize another Golgotha"; after his crime, the sight of blood on his hands unnerves him, and the sight of Banquo's gory locks sends him into hysterics. The "sights" that overcome him "like a summer's cloud" become habitual, haunting him by day, torturing him at night, making him "eat his meal in fear",

and

sleep

In the affliction of these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly.

(III.ii.17-19)

It is interesting to note that this permanent loss of sleep is ironic. Let them but gain possession of the throne, says Lady Macbeth (echoing what every ambitious person has said before and since), and there will be a lifetime of joy,

Which shall to all our nights and days to come

Give solely sovereign away and masterdom.

(I.vi.69-71)

Yet no sooner are the words spoken and the crime perpetrated than they find their nights and days no longer their own. Sleep is no longer possible. Macbeth's hysterical announcement is prophetic: "Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor shall sleep no more." In the end, they envy the very victims whom they have killed:

Better be with the dead

Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie

In restless ecstasy.

(III.ii.19-22)

How much better off is Duncan, who is beyond the touch of any vicissitude, than is his murderer:

Duncan is in his grave;

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

(III.ii.22-26)

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well: how enviable that must be to those who could not sleep!

In desperation, Macbeth seeks solace in blood. But it brings him no peace. He becomes perpetually restless, subject to fits and moods. One moment he puts on his armor, the next he pulls it off. One moment he bellows defiant orders; the next moment he whimpers in defeat. Edmund Kean, we are told, when acting Macbeth, would run out on the stage and shout in a voice of thunder, "Hang out our banners on the outward walls!" Then a pause. His sword drops to the ground. And he whispers: "The cry is still, 'They come, they come.'"⁴

"What a noble mind is here o'erthrown", says Ophelia of Hamlet. May not the same be said of Macbeth and his lady?

IV

Oddly enough, after this disintegration has gone a long way, Lady Macbeth begins to elicit our sympathy and even our affection. There is nothing lovable about her as she chastises her husband "with the valour of her tongue", or as she calls upon the powers of evil to unsex her. She is the ambitious, unscrupulous, cruel woman who would pluck the infant smiling at her breast and dash its brains out. But beneath this iron front is a heart of flesh that must eventually recognize its own weakness. To bolster up her husband's courage, she puts up a brave front; but when alone, she sees how empty-handed she is:

Nought's had, all's spent,

When our desire is got without content.

(III.ii.4-5)

Obviously, no sympathy can be wasted on her when she is towering in her strength. But man is by nature compassionate and there is compassion for this evil woman when things have gone against her. She has become like a scared little girl, suddenly conscious of all the wrong she has done. When there was real blood on her hands, she had dismissed the matter lightly.

My hands are of your colour; but I shame

To wear a heart so white.

(II.ii.63-65)

Nothing seemed easier than to wash away both blood and guilt: "A little water clears us of this deed." But after the blood is washed away, the blood remains. When she is asleep, when that iron control is relaxed, when sleep "that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care" no longer knits it, then all the suppressed fears and regrets come up to the surface, and what she could not or would not see when waking, she sees when asleep. She sees the blood on her hands. She smells it. All the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten that little hand.⁵

It is then that she utters that triple sigh which must tax the acting ability of even the greatest actresses. "What a sigh is there", says the doctor; "the heart is sorely charged." To which the lady attendant replies: "I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body."

At such a time, Lady Macbeth becomes an object of sympathy. She is the heart-broken little girl sitting on the doorstep, weeping over her broken doll. No man is so callous as not to have compassion on her weeping.

For Lady Macbeth, after all, is only a woman. And even her greatest ambition, criminal though it is, has a strangely unselfish quality. It is not for herself but for her husband that she wants the crown. "It is of him she thinks: she wishes to see her husband on the throne, and to place the sceptre within *his* grasp." In this, Shakespeare departs from his sources, "purging his Lady Macbeth of the personal ambition that the Lady Macbeth of the chronicles appears to be full of."⁶

In such a frame of mind, the spectator may find it easy to share Macbeth's anxiety over his wife's illness. He pleads with the doctor to cure her. He pleads wistfully, knowing that his pleading is in vain. For even the doctor is helpless: "More needs she the divine than the physician."

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,

Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

(V.iii.40-45)

The spectator of such a scene is not a dispassionate observer merely. He is involved somehow in the request to have her cured. He *wants* the patient cured. And he shares the frustration that Macbeth feels when told that his wife is dead: "She should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word." Lady Macbeth, hateful in the hour of victory, becomes an object of affection in her hour of defeat. From a tragic, she has become almost a pathetic figure. And that is her tragedy: she, who sought to rule the world by ruthlessly crushing others, comes closest to ruling it when her own heart is crushed.

V

There is a third tragedy, a downfall in the moral order. On this point it seems necessary to take exception to what some of the better critics have said, who sometimes speak as if the characters of a play were static creatures who from play's beginning to play's end retain the same interior qualities. Thus Elmer Stoll, agreeing with Bridges, speaks of the "unpsychological contrast", or contradiction of "a brave and honourable man plunged into cowardly and dishonourable conduct; an ambitious man, with his thoughts, both before and after the crime, set, not upon the reasons which would impel or justify him, but upon those which deter him".⁷

But the point is, that the brave and honorable man *becomes* cowardly and dishonorable by committing a cowardly and dishonorable deed, and, in so doing, opens the door for greater cowardice and dishonor. The soliloquy

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly

(I.vii.1-2)

is that of a man who has already ceased to be honorable, at least in intention, although he is still aware of the demands of honor. Later on, even the idea of honor no longer means anything to him.

For mine own good

All causes shall give way.

(III.iv.135-136)

The character of Macbeth has visibly deteriorated. The first suggestion of murder "unfixes" his hair and makes his heart pound against his ribs "against the use of nature". But it is a principle both of moralists and of detective story writers that the first crime is the hardest, and that one crime leads to another with progressive ease. The murderer,

having done violence to all that he holds sacred, finds it less violent to repeat the deed. He becomes used to the idea of murder and when occasion offers will resort to it again. "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (III.ii.55). So it is with Macbeth. The anguished soul-searching that precedes the murder of Duncan is entirely absent from the murder of Banquo. Murder becomes second nature to the murderer. He has "supped full with horrors", until nothing becomes any longer horrible. He has waded so deeply in blood that "returning were as tedious as go e'er" (III.iv.138). The man who at first was aware of his "double trust", not unmindful of the loyalty that he owed Duncan as king, as kinsman and as guest, the man who was not without a sense of gratitude towards so gentle and generous a sovereign, later on becomes so completely callous as to order the murder not only of his enemies but of their wives, children and servants, and he entertains the opinion that he has scarcely begun to do anything evil! "We are yet but young in deed" (III.iv.144).

Such a man eventually comes to hate, not only his enemies because they are evil to him, but any good man precisely because he is good.⁸ He orders Banquo's death because

in his royalty of nature

Reigns that which would be fear'd:

... and under him

My Genius is rebuked, as it is said

Mark Antony's was by Caesar.

(III.i.50-57)

This gradual hardening of the heart, this blunting of the conscience, this obfuscation of the mind, this loss of a moral sense ending in a total callousness to evil, is not as easily perceptible as the downfall "of a person in high estate": but it is a downfall none the less. It is a tragedy in the moral order as real (if not as spectacular) as the physical and political downfall of a king.

It is ironic that as the moral sense becomes more blunted, the person, instead of enjoying greater peace of mind, enjoys far less.

VI

At this point the splendid craftsmanship of the Banquet Scene becomes apparent. It is one of the best constructed scenes in Shakespeare, and it is entirely his, since there is no mention of it in Holinshed. It is sometimes said that the turning point of the play is the escape of Fleance. This may be true historically but not dramatically. From a dramatic point of view, Fleance's escape is of little importance, hardly affecting the action of the play. The real turning point, or peripety, of the play is not Fleance's escape but the great Banquet Scene, in which, among other things, Fleance's escape is announced and the ghost of Banquo appears. Macbeth involuntarily reveals his secret crimes in the presence of his entire court gathered with the greatest pomp and circumstance for a state dinner.

It is a glittering scene, the kind that Shakespeare, with an eye for theater, gloried in. The lords and ladies of the kingdom, dressed in their robes of state, file into the banquet hall and are shown to their places--for protocol must be observed and the order of precedence followed minutely: "You know your own degrees." There is a sound of trumpets, the lords and ladies bow, the attendants enter, and behind them, in full regalia, the king and queen. It is an hour of triumph for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They mount the dais. The queen sits down. Macbeth, smiling and in a hearty voice, bids everyone welcome:

at first

And last, the hearty welcome.

There is a murmur of thanks, a sound of shuffled chairs, the lords help the ladies, then they themselves sit down.

The king does not sit down. He feels so carefree, he must descend from the dais and mingle with the guests. There is a heartiness in his voice and a smile on his countenance as he announces this.

Ourself will mingle with society,

And play the humble host.

The queen remains on the dais. She will keep her state, but "in best time" she will descend to mingle with the guests. It is of course dramatically ironic that when she does descend, it will not be "in best time" but in worst. This, however, is in the future. There is no hint of it as yet. There is no cloud on the horizon. Lady Macbeth is gracious. Macbeth is jovial. Both are the perfect host and hostess:

Lady Macbeth.

Pronounce it for me, Sir, to all our friends;

For my heart speaks, they are welcome.

Macbeth.

See, they encounter thee with their hearts' thanks.

It is their hour of triumph. Why not? Are not all the lords and ladies here (Macduff, of course, and Banquo excepted), attired in glittering robes of state? And are not all here to acclaim Macbeth's and his queen's "solely sovereign sway and masterdom"?

There is of course another cause for rejoicing. Banquo at this moment is being put out of the way--Banquo the troublesome, Banquo who knew too much, Banquo and his son, Fleance, destined to beget kings. Macbeth has never felt more secure. He feels that from now on nothing can trouble his peace. He feels "perfect":

Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,

As broad and general as the casing air.

There is a chair in the middle of the guests' table. It is the seat of honor, reserved for Banquo. With charming informality Macbeth goes to the chair and sits down with the guests.

Both sides are even; here I'll sit in the midst.

He urges everyone to enjoy himself. Later on he intends to propose a jovial toast:

Be large in mirth: anon, we'll drink a measure

The table round.

At this moment (Shakespeare likes to indulge in sharp dramatic contrasts) there is a little interruption. A liveried page comes into the banquet hall and whispers a message in the king's ear. Someone to see him outside. Macbeth stands up. The lords and ladies start to rise to their feet but he prevents them. He goes to the door. The murderer stands before him. "There's blood upon thy face", says the king, anxiously. The reply is boastful: "'Tis Banquo's then." Ah. That's fine. Macbeth can afford to joke: "'Tis better thee without than he within." He says it with a chuckle, pointing with his thumb towards the banquet hall. But he wants explicit information: "Is he dispatched?" Dispatched. The thug does not know what the word means. His vocabulary is limited. He is a blunt man who calls a spade a spade.

My Lord his throat is cut;

That I did for him.

Macbeth chuckles. He indulges in a pun: "Thou art the best of the cut-throats." And of course, without a doubt, Fleance must be dead too?

he's good that did the like for Fleance:

If thou didst it, thou art the nonpareil.

And then, for the first time during that glittering evening, something goes wrong. The murderer hesitates, looks down on his hands, shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Most royal sir--" he breaks off and looks away. Macbeth stares at him. What can possibly have happened? Speak up, man! The murderer blurts it out. "Fleance is scap'd." Macbeth is stunned. In a moment all his security has gone crashing to the ground. He now feels constrained, suffocated: "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd".

The fit, however, is momentary. After all, the essential thing has been done. Banquo is dead. If Fleance has escaped, at least he is not yet a full-grown serpent. He has no venom yet, "no teeth for the present". Macbeth goes back to the banquet hall, and resumes the manner of the hearty host:

Now, good digestion wait on appetite,

And health on both.

He even gives a little speech, the type of flattering speech one hears at banquets:

Here had we now our country's honour roof'd,

Were the grac'd person of our Banquo present;

Who may I rather challenge for unkindness

Than pity for mischance.

It is safe enough to talk of Banquo. Safe in a ditch he lies. But something has again gone wrong. There had been an empty chair before. Now the table seems full.

Pleas't your Highness

To grace us with your royal company?

Why doesn't he sit down? Why does he look puzzled around the table? "The table's full!" Why, the man must be getting blind. Can't he see? "Here is a place reserv'd, sir." Macbeth looks about him in bewilderment. "Where?" They point to the empty chair. "Here, my good lord." But the king is staring at that empty chair. He is staring in an intent manner, his eyes bulging. What can be the matter? "What is't that moves your Highness?" Then the king speaks. His voice is unnatural. He is trembling all over:

Thou canst not say I did it: never shake

Thy gory locks at me.

There is consternation all around. Someone gets up. Someone shouts: "Gentlemen, rise! his highness is not well!" Everyone is on his feet. The queen rushes down from the dais. No, no. Sit down. Sit down everybody. This is nothing. Nothing at all. Go on eating, please! In a moment she is beside her husband. "Are you a man?" she whispers hoarsely. But he answers aloud, for every one to hear

Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that

Which might appal the devil.

Oh nonsense, she says. This is another one of your hallucinations.

Why do you make such faces? When all's done

You look but on a stool.

But Macbeth sees more than a stool. And he proceeds to give more damning revelations as he continues to look on the horrible spectacle which he alone sees.

The apparition vanishes. Macbeth heaves a sigh of relief. He wipes the perspiration from his forehead. But the harm is done. The dinner is spoiled.

He tries to save the pieces by proposing a toast. Give me a cup. Fill full. Lords and ladies, I give you--Banquo. Would he were here. And of course he *is* there. The cup crashes to the floor. The wine is spilled. "Avaunt! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!" He enumerates the blood-curdling details:

Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;

Thou has no speculation in those eyes,

Which thou dost glare with.

The queen tries to cover up. This is a common sickness of his. It is nothing. Pay no attention to it. But it is difficult not to pay attention to the shouting king:

Hence horrible shadow!

Unreal mockery, hence!

The ghost vanishes again. And Macbeth recovers.

Why so, being gone,

I am a man again. Pray you, sit still.

But the harm has been irretrievably done. The cat is out of the bag. Macbeth has revealed his crimes to the entire court. There is a pointedness to Ross's question: "What sights, my lord?" To prevent further revelations, Lady Macbeth has no choice but to dismiss the company peremptorily.

At once, good night.

Stand not upon the order of your going,

But go at once.

Few banquets have ended as precipitately as that. What had started as a royal dinner has ended as a shambles. And Macbeth, who began the evening with a feeling of confident cheerfulness, now feels that he is doomed. "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood." You can't hide a murder. The birds, the trees, the very stones will reveal the "secretest man of blood".

There is now no more hope. He will go betimes to the weird sisters to "know, by the worst means, the worst". He has waded so deeply in blood, he might as well go in deeper. There is no backing out now. For his own good, all things must give way. If he is doomed to destruction himself, he can at least destroy others. He has just begun. He is but young in deed.

That is the Banquet Scene. It is a grand peripety. And it dramatizes effectively the moral tragedy of Macbeth.

VII

If Macbeth's tragedy is a disturbance of right order in the physical, psychological and moral world, it is no less so in the social. It is a rending of the social fabric, an overturning of the right order, a twisting of the right relationship among human beings. This seems the significance of the repeated use of the word "unnatural". The play is full of "unnatural" images: a mousing owl kills a soaring falcon; Duncan's horses, "beauteous and swift, the minions of their race", turn wild and eat each other; darkness covers the face of day "when living light should kiss it"; and the weird sisters, who should be women, have the beards of men. Unnatural, too, is the suspicion that falls upon the grooms: they have killed the king whom they were supposed to protect. More unnatural is the suspicion that falls on Malcolm and Donalbain, who are suspected of killing their father. These are of course but images of the really unnatural thing: "the nearer in blood, the nearer bloody".

The murder of Duncan is a multiple sin. It is a sin against God and against society on many counts: it is murder--a sin against justice; it is the murder of a kinsman--a sin against piety; it is regicide--a sin against fealty, a sin of sacrilege as the Middle Ages understood sacrilege, and of perjury since in medieval times it was the violation of an oath. Finally, it is the murder of a guest by his host--a sin against the rules of hospitality which all civilized nations deem sacred. "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" (I.vii.82).

It is significant, as Stoll remarks, that Shakespeare soft-pedals what might have been considered a mitigating circumstance in Macbeth's crime. Duncan's appointment of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland and heir-apparent was a violation of the rules of succession. That fact could well have given Macbeth a grievance which, though it could not possibly justify murder, might at least have elicited sympathy for him as an injured party. By glossing over this circumstance, Shakespeare deprives Macbeth of any grievance, and makes his crime stand out in stark heinousness, without any possible motive for it except "vaulting ambition".⁹

The murder of Duncan is only the beginning of the eversion of the social order. Once the usurper is on the throne, the reign of law gives way to the reign of terror. The tyrant has a spy in every household. Every day

New windows howl, new orphans cry; new sorrows

Strike heaven on the face. ...

(IV.iii.4-6)

It is an unnatural state of affairs, and nature must reestablish itself. Order must be restored, but at the expense of those who violate it.

Now o'er the one-half world

Nature seems dead

(II.i.49-50)

says Macbeth when he commits his first crime. But nature is far from dead. Nature is very much alive, and it is a vengeful nature.

Unnatural deeds

Do breed unnatural troubles.

(V.i.78-79)

So Lady Macbeth must walk in her sleep: "A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching" (V.i.10-12). And the tyrant himself must feel the tortures of anxiety: "O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife" (III.ii.36). Macbeth feels old age coming, perhaps prematurely. His way of life "has fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf". But he cannot hope for the natural consolations of old age. These are not available to him who has violated nature:

And that which should accompany old age,

As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,

I must not look to have; but in their stead,

Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath,

Which the poor heart would feign deny, and dare not.

(V.iii.24-28)

The land is sick; there is no medicinal herb or purgative drug that could purge it. There is only one cure: the tyrant's death.

The disease in the end is cured. The body politic is purged. Order is reestablished. It is ever thus in Shakespeare. No matter what upheavals may occur, in the end right order reasserts itself. Lear foolishly divides his kingdom, only to have it reunited under Albany. Caesar is murdered and a civil war ensues, only to have another Caesar

give orders about the disposal of Brutus' corpse. Hamlet dies, as does almost everybody else, but Fortinbras arrives in time to assume the reins of state. Shakespeare is a believer in the social order. It is an order capable of reestablishing itself--but at the expense of those who have tried to destroy it. And in *Macbeth*, it is significant that the downfall of those who have violated the social order begins in that great symbol of social solidarity, the banquet.

VIII

There remains the theological tragedy, a distinct dimension of the moral and social drama we have been considering.

This theological dimension is seen, first of all, in the preternatural influences that are brought to bear upon the action. The weird sisters are a "supernatural soliciting" that act like a catalyst. They do not plant in Macbeth a desire for the crown, which presumably he has already entertained:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair?

(I.iii.51)

But if they do not give him the idea, they induce him "to catch the nearest way". Later, they induce in him a recklessness arising from false security. "Be bloody, bold and resolute." Hamlet's mistake (from a purely dramatic point of view) is in not heeding the ghost despite confirmatory evidence; Macbeth's is in paying too careful attention to these "juggling fiends"

That palter with us in a double sense;

That keep the word of promise to our ear,

And break it to our hope.

(V.vii.48-51)

But the theological dimension of *Macbeth* is likewise seen in another direction altogether. It is impossible to read Shakespearian tragedy without perceiving its theological implications. For Shakespearian tragedy deals with such things as sin and free will, guilt and retribution, fate and chance, good and evil, God and human destiny, God's goodness and the problem of human suffering, God's love and man's inhumanity to man. These are the basic problems of man, and these are theological problems.

There is a sense in which we may consider the story of Macbeth a special theological tragedy, over and above the moral, psychological and social tragedy already considered above. Although every mortal sin is (in a manner of speaking) a tragedy, since it entails the loss of God's friendship and the frustration of man's end; nevertheless repentance wipes away sin. "If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool" (Is.i.18). For this reason, though every sin is a misfortune, it is not proper to speak of it as tragic. The Church herself, while condemning sin, speaks of Adam's sin as a happy fault--*O felix culpa quae tantum meruit Salvatorem*--as if Adam had actually done us a favor by sinning!

It is of course only a manner of speaking, but it illustrates the point we wish to make, namely, that although in one sense every serious sin is tragic, in another sense there is only one sin that is really and truly and hopelessly

tragic--and that is final impenitence. Peter sinned, Peter repented, Peter is a saint; Judas sinned, Judas hanged himself. "It were better for that man never to have been born." Judas' sin is tragic, Peter's is not.

In this sense, Macbeth is theologically a tragic figure. He is different from Lear or Hamlet: both are sinners, but both die repentant. Macbeth realizes his sin and its consequences. He deplores the uselessness of his crime:

If't be so,

For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings. ...

(III.i.64-70)

But to regret the uselessness of a crime is not repentance. At no time is Macbeth repentant. Wilson Knight perhaps does not put the matter very happily when he says (with reference to V.iii.24 ff.), "Macbeth at the last, by self-knowledge, attains grace."¹⁰ Self-knowledge is indeed a grace and is a first step towards repentance. With Macbeth the self-knowledge does not lead to repentance, but remains in the realm of self-pity.

In the end he gives way to despair. His crimes have brought him nothing but ruin. He grows weary of life itself. He finds it has no meaning: a walking shadow, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The point about these comparisons is not that they are literally true--for they are not--but that they are dramatically true. They express the meaninglessness of life to a man who has expected too much from it, and who, in trying to grasp all, has lost all. Having rejected life's true meaning, he finds it in the end meaningless.

The full horror of his sins is that they are committed with full knowledge of their being against the law of God, and with a deliberate decision to risk damnation in hell: "We'ld jump the life to come." But one cannot jump the life to come. One must be ready to pay the consequences. One cannot deliberately turn one's back on God and expect to do it with impunity.

Within the framework, therefore, of Christian theology, which is the framework of the play, Macbeth's soul is damned. He dies unrepentant. He is no longer his own master. He has become a slave of "the common Enemy of Man": "the angel whom thou still hast serv'd" (V.vii.43). Having gained the world, he has lost his soul. To the Christian that is the greatest tragedy.

When Shakespeare's other tragic heroes die, tender things are said of them. "This was the noblest Roman of them all", says Antony of Brutus. Of the dying Othello it was said that "he was great of heart". When Lear's great and foolish heart finally breaks, it is like the breaking of a dike, and all the hearts around him are overwhelmed in the flood. When Hamlet dies, he is called a "sweet prince". But when Macbeth dies, he is called a "hell-hound". And it is the only appropriate word. How "noble Macbeth" has turned into a hell-hound is a tragedy in the physical, psychological, moral, social, and theological order. It is the fearful downfall of a spirit that had the makings of greatness.¹¹

Notes

1. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), lecture 9. On the "simplicity" of *Macbeth*, see lect. 10; on its brevity, Appendix, Note AA.
2. Robert Bridges among others has called attention to this heroic stature of Macbeth. The interest in *Macbeth*, he says, "is the perpetration of a crime by a man whose magnificent qualities of mind, extreme courage and poetic imagination, raise the villainies above common meanness and give occasion for a superhuman conflict of images and ideas."--Apud E. E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (1933, reprinted New York 1951), p. 78.
3. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, lect. 10.
4. A. C. Sprague, *Shakespearean Players and Performances* (Harvard, 1953), p. 75.
5. For an amusing anecdote that illustrates how real Mrs. Siddons made this blood seem on her hands, see Furness' *Variorum Macbeth*, p. 477.
6. Mrs. Jameson, *Characteristics of Women* (London, 1833), apud Furness' *Variorum*, pp. 477-478.
7. *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, p. 77.
8. Wilson Knight has put it very well: "So he fears, envies, hates Banquo who has the reality of honour whereas he has but the mockery, a ghoulish dream of reality. He envies Banquo's posterity their royal destiny won in terms of nature, not in terms of crime ..." *The Imperial Theme* (3rd ed. London 1951), p. 131.
9. E. E. Stoll, p. 80 and elsewhere.
10. *The Imperial Theme*, p. 128.
11. Citations from the play are from the Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Craig.

Source: Miguel A. Bernad, "The Five Tragedies in *Macbeth*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (winter 1962): 49-61.

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